

Subverting Genre: The Coen Brothers, Film Noir, and Genre Theory

...a genre can be studied, like a language, as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated, consciously or otherwise, through cultural consensus. Our shared knowledge of the rules of any film genre enables us to understand and evaluate individual genre films, just as our shared knowledge of the English grammar enables me to write this sentence and you interpret it (Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* 565-566).

I

As film scholar Thomas Schatz argues, there exists a certain formula for studying a genre. Through semiotic interpretation and syntactic/semantic analysis, audiences can categorize narratives into genres, creating a framework for cinematic meaning and generation of expectations. The films of Joel and Ethan Coen revel in contradiction, being crafted out of their dual tendencies toward weight dramas and frivolous comedies, from profound commentaries to ridiculous farces. In *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) and *The Big Lebowski* in particular, the Coens explore the limits of genre through characters who seem to exist on the periphery of their own lives, overshadowed and consumed by events beyond their control. Defined by their tonal fluidity and narrative non-conformism, both films blur the boundaries of genre, using familiar tropes to clarify or resolve narratives, but as a conduit to challenge traditions of genre. Capturing life's inherent unpredictability and the futility of searching for meaning in a world governed by randomness, the Coens' use of such characters allows them to simultaneously explore and subvert the personification of existential struggle and metaphysical inquisition. By focusing on

humanity's tendency to accentuate existence, and its failure in doing so, their film's reflect the audience's tendency to seek meaning where there is none.

The futility of existence is either subverted, or reinforced, through both Ed Crane (*The Man Who Wasn't There*) and The Dude (*The Big Lebowski*). The Coens do this by approaching genre in a defiant way wherein they resist being classified. By deconstructing traditional narratives and tonal conventions of film noir and comedy, they create final products that excel beyond straightforward genre films. *The Man Who Wasn't There* has the building blocks to be a traditional film noir—the monochromatic color scale, the time and setting, the fatalist themes—yet it denies its protagonist the satisfaction of being able to control his story. Unlike in traditional noir, Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) is passive and powerless. His subdued demeanor subverts the traditional “hard-boiled” nature of noir protagonists. *The Big Lebowski* reconfigures the tropes of the neo-noir through an absurdist, comedic lens packed with philosophical and existential metaphors. Both films use different templates to the same end—retooling traditional narratives wherein the actions of the protagonist say more about the futility and meaninglessness of existence, rather than the resolve larger conflicts or explore moral quandaries.

Central to absurdist philosophy, these themes are transformed and reimagined in their films *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *The Big Lebowski*. This is achieved by the Coens' routine and deliberate subversion of genre conventions and traditional narrative structure. In this essay, I will elucidate how they achieve this subversive, postmodern commentary through the lens of genre theories. By referring to the work of scholars like Thomas Schatz and Rick Altman and broad absurdist philosophy, I will illustrate the ways in which the Coens' recontextualize traditional ways of thinking about narrative through genre, and how they comment on existence through this rethinking of convention.

II

Semiotics is broadly construed as the study of signs, and the rules that govern how they can be used to express and articulate meaning in communication, primarily linguistics. More specific to film, though, semiotics can assist in variegating *types* of films i.e., genres. Film scholar Thomas Schatz, in his book titled *Hollywood Genres*, argues that the fundamental structural components of a film genre are “plot, character, setting, thematics, and style”. These conventions form an invisible contract between filmmaker and audience, guiding expectations (Schatz 564). This framework provides a lens through which audiences can judge films within specific genres, and judge the value of a certain film with regard to its conformism to a particular genre tradition (Schatz 567). Nevertheless, Schatz denotes that filmmakers are in a “rather curious bind: they must continually vary and reinvent the generic formula. At the same time they must exploit those qualities that made the genre popular in the first place (Schatz 36).

Supplementing Schatz’s ideas, Rick Altman denotes that genre is a system composed of “semantic” and “syntactic” elements. Staying to true its basis in semiology, Altman argues that a genre’s semantic elements (character types, settings, costumes, etc.) are letters and words, whereas its syntactic elements are more rooted in the structure of these elements i.e., sentences and grammar (Altman 10). Genres develop through conventions that establish a set of expectations between filmmakers and audiences, guiding the creation and reception of films within a particular genre. However, as Schatz notes, this system is not set in stone—filmmakers are constantly working within it, finding ways to push its boundaries or reframe the conventions, all the while still tapping into the familiar qualities that make the genre resonate in the first place.

The Coen Brothers showcase their mastery in toying with genre conventions in their creation of films that simultaneously embrace and deconstruct the expectations audiences bring to them. While Schatz and Altman's structural frameworks help us understand how genre functions, the Coens use them as the very tools with which to challenge them. Their films exist in dialogue with the traditions they appear to honor, channeling either farce or pastiche, to wit: *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *The Big Lebowski* both exist as subversive plays on two forms of noir: traditional film noir and neo-noir. In the following sections, I will explore the ways in which they dispel and parody these well-established genres.

III

In *Soft-Boiled Cinema*, Brian J. Snee terms the Coens' manipulation of genre as a "neo-classical approach to film narration", wherein the filmmakers challenge the boundaries of genre while commenting on its own pitfalls and historic background (Snee 212). He argues that while the Coens channel classical modes of "cinematic address" in their works, they are "not content merely to borrow from and make reference to" the works that inspire them. Rather, they work with whichever source material or tradition they seek to re-deploy, and in turn produce a film that attempts to alter the viewer's identification with them (Snee 219). He holds that the Coens' self-reflexivity achieves in reminding viewers of their agency and positions themselves as a guiding force through which the audience can identify with the structures they seek to abandon (Snee 218-19). Their conformism to convention goes only so far, so as to set those conventions up in an ironic way. Altman contends that "syntactic expectation, set up by a semantic signal, is matched by a parallel tendency to expect specific syntactic signals to lead to pre-determined semantic fields" (Altman 17). Essentially, he argues the film viewer construes certain expectations and meaning from the apparent semantic facade, and is then led along the

path of least resistance if the syntactic elements follow suit, in turn, being satisfied in their viewing of a genre film. The Coens, by depending on the audience's familiarity with these signals, fracture this claim.

The Man Who Wasn't There has the trappings of a classic film noir—set in the 1940s, the black-and-white cinematography, the brooding protagonist, crime, and themes of greed, power, and societal depravity—yet the manipulation of these elements is where the film deviates. Ed Crane is not the typical noir protagonist; he lacks the agency, emotion, and decisiveness associated with the genre's typical hard-boiled heroes. As Schatz notes, genre conventions function as “a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated...through cultural consensus” (Schatz 565). Given the film's distance from noir's classical period, such a revisionist approach is almost inevitable. The Coens making this film almost 60 years after the classical period of film noir invites recontextualization and nuanced cultural differences.

Though the film retains noir's semantic signifiers—brooding voice-over, eccentric side characters, and a fatalist atmosphere—it deviates significantly in its syntactic setup. The protagonist's inactivity and relative detachment from the events of the film differs from the traditional noir hero, who makes decisions that affect the plot and narrative direction. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Ed Crane lacks the agency to control his narrative. This is a quality reflected in the character's personal outlook, mentioned repeatedly by him in the voice-over. He is an entity that things happen to, an object, rather than a subject, a person who makes things happen. While this is a simple delineation, it is one of the key subversive elements in the film. Another way in which the film is its narrative structure and pacing. While classic noir follows a loose but discernible three-act structure, often marked by an inciting incident, a descent, a twist, a climax, and a confrontation with morality, the Coens' film meanders, slowly unravelling with quiet

unease but never really *arriving*. The stakes shift too; the inciting incident (Crane blackmails Big Dave for money to invest in a dry-cleaning business) is relatively low-stakes when compared to the typical noir. The high-stakes tension only arises in the aftermath. Crane's confrontation with the central conflict—his wife's false incarceration for Big Dave's murder—is descended, as he avoids directly addressing her innocence or taking action to clear her name and confessing to his crime. The rest of the film from there on out unspools in a directionless way, often splintering into varying worlds that explore the absurdity of Crane's situation.

In this way, the film reflects a postmodern sensibility, highlighting how the construct of the noir film can be reconfigured in order to reflect the randomness and absurdity of life. The Coens steep their film within the framework of classic noir, therefore allowing themselves a pathway to manipulate other aspects of the genre in order to create a microcosmic representation of what they are actually trying to say. By resisting narrative closure, a traditional signifier of film noir, the film also resists answering the existential questions it poses. In its pacing and focus on the absurdity of Crane's life in general, the film specifically challenges the genre's conventions and therefore, also offers a haunting reflection on the unanswerability of existence. Even in the film's final moments, the viewer leaves the film with more questions than answers and Ed Crane's final moments are deeply unsatisfying. Here, Snee's idea of the Coens' "neoclassicism" comes to a full-head, reinforcing his argument that their film's play with genre conventions not just to entertain, but to force a deeper reflection on the structures we take for granted (Snee 219).

While *The Man Who Wasn't There* represents a postmodern revision of classical-period film noir, the Coens continue this tendency in *The Big Lebowski*, which reimagines the neo-noir genre through an absurdist lens, blending comedy and crime drama into a narrative defined by its

apathy and overall lethargy. *Lebowski* replaces the tension and moral complexity that underscores *TMWWT* with humor and a stronger resistance toward narrative coherence.

In *The Big Lebowski*, the Coens reverse the relationship between syntax and semantics. The film maintains the neo-noir structure—a straightforward mystery of a kidnapped wife and stolen ransom money, subplots that entangle the primary conflict, and intertwining storylines culminating at the end, all the while colored with side characters immersed in criminal conspiracy. However, the film's semantic features are tweaked, i.e., its thematic focus and its characterization of the protagonist Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski (Jeff Bridges). The Dude exists as the antithetical noir hero, even more so than Ed Crane. While in *TMWWT*, Crane's indifference and moral ambiguity is altered relative to film noir protagonists, The Dude in *Lebowski* seems completely detached from the events of the film. The theft of his rug is the inciting incident, but it does not warrant a journey of revenge and of uncovering a secret plot—he just wants his rug back. His apathy is met with overwhelming complexity when he is entangled in a long-winded criminal conspiracy involving billionaires, nihilists, and eccentric socialites. Therefore, his concern of the retrieval of his rug is trivialized, absurdly subverted by the seemingly high-stakes situation he is thrown into. Additionally, there is absolutely no moral ambiguity portrayed through the protagonist. The Dude is laid-back, unconcerned with anything but his rug and bowling. Any meaningful internal conflict that could arise is shot down almost instantly and his quest for justice is not inherent, rather it is forced upon him by external forces. The Dude's desire for justice is absent, and the film's constitution of his personal stakes subverts traditional neo-noir. The plot of a traditional neo-noir film revolves around extremely high-stake conflicts, often involving violence, sexuality, and the dark underworld. While *The Big Lebowski* contains slivers of all of these elements, it is not exactly loyal to them. The kidnapping starts off as

high-stakes, but is revealed to be a ruse. The violence and sexuality is parodied and made into a joke, somehow still retaining a sense of tension throughout. The dark underworld of the film, and its key antagonists, “The Nihilists”, are revealed to be a non-threatening boy-band.

In this way, *The Big Lebowski*, much like *TMWWT*, reimagines the elements of such an established genre in neo-noir. The difference here is that the Coens, instead of toying with the conventional structure and narrative direction of the genre, tweak its semantic signifiers. Saturating the film with irony, farce, and absurdity, yet still retaining the structural elements of the work it is retooling, *The Big Lebowski* turns the genre on its head. In rejecting the typical moral seriousness and darkness of neo-noir, and illustrating the inherent flexibility of genre and tradition, the film once again reflects the Coens’ exploration of life’s inherent meaninglessness and randomness.

IV

The Man Who Wasn’t There and *The Big Lebowski* operate within vastly different tones and traditions, yet they are thematically consistent. In showing how subverting conventions of genre, the Coens illustrate how to use established frameworks in order to reimagine storytelling as more than a tool for narration. Snee argues that the audience is meant to “identify with the Coens, whose absent presence is revealed through the transgressions, subversions, and allusions that define their films” (Snee 220). This elucidation invites the exploration of what *exactly* the Coens’ presence is within these films.

In *TMWWT*, the Coens illustrate their ability to use generic frameworks as a means of subversion rather than conformism. By working within the established cultural and artistic format of film noir, they spin their narrative to highlight the inherent absurdity hidden within it.

Ed Crane's detachment from his life led him down a series of inescapable events that entangled him within an unbeatable system. The film relies on heavy absurd turns that seem to result in more ambiguity than resolution. The blackmail plot, leading to the murder of Big Dave and Crane's wife's false arrest and subsequent suicide, the mysterious murder of Creighton Tolliver, the odd relationship between him and Birdy, and his eventual execution—these events form a convoluted plot that feels less like the unravelling of a calculated noir plot and more like a bleak cosmic joke. The Coens use this spiral to highlight the futility of human agency, subverting noir's reliance on the protagonist's morally charged actions. Meanwhile in *The Big Lebowski*, the absurd takes on a more comedic form but is no less effective in its attempt to challenge preconceived notions of genre. As illustrated, the film mirrors the typical syntax of a neo-noir but juxtaposes it with a frivolous semantic re-arrangement. As the plot progresses, the Coens lean into the absurdity of the extremely low-stakes situation The Dude is caught up in, stemming primarily from the theft of his rug. Eventually, all the high-stake action in the film is rendered pointless—Bunny was never kidnapped, the ransom money was never found, and the main antagonists, who are rarely ever seen, are comically incompetent. In doing so, the Coen's convert neo-noir's tension and darkness into a farce, stripping bare the genre's faux-rigidity while using the very tropes they mock in order to do it. *The Big Lebowski* relies on absurdist and existential themes in order to truly critique convention; societal convention, rather than generic. In *The Dream Abides*, ShaunAnne Tangney likens the Coens reconstruction of the genre as a critique on the failure of the American Dream, writing that:

...like those classic films noir, [*The Big Lebowski*] also offers a critique, but because the film is set in a late-twentieth-century, late-capitalist America, the alienation is

amplified and focused on the widening gap between rich and poor...and prompts a reevaluation of the American Dream itself (Tangney 176).

Her argument essentially supports the contention that the film's absurd bent does not lie in its randomness but in its shining a light on the banality of life, as shown through its protagonist. The Dude, indifferent to the chaos surrounding him, embodies a rejection of societal expectations, underscoring the emptiness of conventional pursuits. His existence in a "late-capitalist America" is rendered almost pointless, since he lacks the tendency for a reactionary and introspective outlook—a character trait that noirs, of all eras, require. In the same vein, *The Man Who Wasn't There* comments on the notions of agency as what it means to 'exist'. Ed Crane's inaction and passive nature lets the world of the film swallow him whole, no matter his attempts to regain control after his life is thrown off course. Both film's use the templates of their respective genres to conversely reposition them as commentaries on the impossibility to control, and inability to define, life.

V

In conclusion, we can see that in both *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *The Big Lebowski*, the Coen Brothers use the familiar frameworks of noir and neo-noir not just to tell stories, but to subvert them. While both films work within established genre conventions, and actually excel within them, they also challenge the expectations that these genres bring, offering a post-modernist reflection on the meaning of 'meaning' itself. By exploring subjects such as agency, existence, and purpose, *TMWWT* deconstructs the traditional film noir hero by presenting a protagonist whose impassivity and lack of yearning mirror life's inherent randomness and inexplicability. The film's absurd turns and convoluted plot manifest as

reimaginings of traditional noir convention. This reflects the Coens' critique of the genre, repurposing it to inhabit an exploration of the futility of human efforts to impose order or meaning. Similarly, *The Big Lebowski* turns the tables on neo-noir, infusing it with comedic absurdity and apathy. By echoing the structure of a typical film in the genre and then trivializing the stakes and consequences of the plot, the film exposes the emptiness of the genre's traditions while simultaneously providing a sharp critique of the societal aspects that influenced it. The Dude's apathy toward ever-heightening conspiracy surrounding him serves as a subversive commentary on the futility of striving for meaningful societal change. Neo-noir tendency toward a reflection of moral and ethical constructs allows *The Big Lebowski* to satirize its complexity.

Therefore, as Snee suggests, the Coens' presence in their films is not just as creators but as critics, using genre as a tool to both expose the absurdities in storytelling and society. By refusing to provide narrative and moral closure, these two films echo the absurdist belief that life is often meaningless and the attempts to define it are always going to be rendered fruitless. As a method of "cinematic address", as Snee terms it, this type of genre subversion leaves us with a haunting, unresolved, and endless search for meaning; something that the Coens do not discourage, but warn against.

Works Cited

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